

Larry Bivins, *St. Cloud Times*

WASHINGTON - Just hours after introducing legislation in support of a new St. Croix River bridge, Rep. Michele Bachmann found herself on the defensive against attacks from environmental groups.

One group, American Rivers, which works to protect the nation's rivers, accused Bachmann of backing an earmark to pay for a nearly \$700 million four-lane bridge that would cross the St. Croix, replacing the 80-year-old Stillwater Lift Bridge. Bachmann has been a staunch opponent of earmarks, targeted funding requested by lawmakers for specific projects in their districts.

"Bachmann's earmark for a massive freeway would cost taxpayers over \$600 million, cause more pollution and traffic and irreversibly damage the beauty of the Lower St. Croix," American Rivers President Rebecca Wodder said in a statement.

Wodder, whose group has the Lower St. Croix National Scenic Riverway on its endangered rivers list, said Bachmann's proposal would create "an irresponsible loophole" to get around an October National Park Service ruling that the proposed bridge would violate the U.S. Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

Bachmann rushed to respond to what she called falsehoods and propaganda from "radical environmental groups" about her bill.

"There is no appropriation in this bill to fund this project," Bachmann said in a statement. She countered that environmental groups are responsible for escalating the bridge's cost from \$120 million to nearly \$700 million through lawsuits.

"Instead of focusing on safety, job creation and the best interests of Minnesota, they are pushing their radical political agenda," Bachmann said of the groups. "These groups and I may never agree on what the river crossing should look like, but I am calling on them to stop lying about my legislation."

The drama unfolded Tuesday after Bachmann announced her proposal "to facilitate" the project by endorsing the Park Service's 2005 approval of the plan. Bachmann's bill is co-sponsored by Wisconsin Reps. Ron Kind, a Democrat, and Sean Duffy, a Republican, whose districts include the river that runs along the Minnesota-Wisconsin border.

Joshua Houdek, land-use and transportation program manager for the Sierra Club North Star Chapter, called the proposal environmentally and fiscally irresponsible.

"A smaller-scale bridge can be built in a way that meets residents' needs while dramatically reducing impacts on this national and regional treasure," Houdek said. "The hundreds of millions that could be potentially saved are badly needed to create jobs on urgent MnDOT road and bridge repair projects."

Bachmann's legislation not only drew fire from environmental groups, it also set up a showdown with neighboring Rep. Betty McCollum, D-St. Paul. McCollum has vowed to fight any proposal to remove the St. Croix River from the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

"I will do everything in my power as a member of Congress to defeat any federal legislation that lifts the protections from the Lower St. Croix National Scenic Riverway for a project of this magnitude," McCollum wrote in a Feb. 25 letter to the St. Croix County Board of Supervisors, which wants Minnesota and Wisconsin lawmakers to support exempting the river from the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. "Frankly, the prospect of such legislation becoming law is negligible, which makes such a strategy more of a political distraction than contributing to a real transportation solution."